

Harrison County Youth Court celebrates GED, wellness programs

November 29, 2012

Harrison County Youth Court is addressing health and education needs of troubled children and their families by offering wellness and GED programs.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for 2 p.m. Friday, Nov. 30, at 47 Maples Drive in Gulfport. County and Youth Court officials will show the community the trailers which house the GED program, Wellness Clinic, Juvenile Drug Court and supervised parental visitation space. Harrison County Board of Supervisor President Kim Savant will cut the ribbons.

The programs grew so fast that they outgrew space at the Youth Court. The Harrison County Board of Supervisors provided trailers which had previously been used to house other local government services in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Poverty and lack of education are common among families who come under the jurisdiction of the Harrison County Youth Court as a result of child abuse, neglect and juvenile delinquency. Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, who presides over the Youth Court, set up the Wellness Clinic and GED classes to address some of the underlying problems which can contribute to abuse, neglect and delinquency.

“What we are trying to do is address the problems,” Judge Alfonso said. “We deal with many poverty-level people. We frequently have cases where the utilities have been cut off or the water has been cut off. Many families are very dependent on the food stamp program. The lists are long for public housing. Some have mental health issues. What I’m trying to do is provide them the services.”

Judge Alfonso took office as Harrison County Court and Youth Court Judge in January 2011. Plans for the Harrison County Youth Drug Court were already underway then, and she immediately began placing children who had drug and alcohol problems into that program. She initiated a partnership with Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College to provide GED classes in July 2011. She made a similar partnership with the Mississippi Department of Health to provide the Wellness Clinic about six months ago. Gulf Coast Community Mental Health Center has agreed to a similar relationship with the court to make mental health services more available.

“It took the cooperation of a range of professionals and the support of the Board of Supervisors to make these things happen. There is a broad group of people who are trying to improve services for kids,” Judge Alfonso said.

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College provides two part-time adult education teachers who conduct four classes a week. The Department of Health provides a nurse, maternal child coordinator and social worker who provide health services at the Wellness Clinic twice a month.

The Wellness Clinic and GED program share a trailer outside the Youth Court Building on Maples Drive. The Youth Drug Court has a trailer. Another trailer provides Department of Human Services social workers with space for supervised parent-child

visitation for parents who have lost custody. A fourth trailer provides office for the volunteers of CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, who work with abused and neglected children. The fifth trailer, still empty, is the future office of Gulf Coast Mental Health clinicians who are currently housed at the Youth Court. The court is trying to find used furniture for the trailer, since there is no budget for that.

The programs are housed on site at the court to make them more accessible to struggling families.

“We are seeing kids born with no prenatal care whatsoever. These are not healthy kids. The mothers are not taking advantage of the resources that are out there. We are trying to make it be more user friendly so they will take advantage of the prenatal care,” Judge Alfonso said.

The GED program works mostly with parents. A few teens who faced delinquency charges are enrolled, but most are parents of children who are under the supervision of the Youth Court as a result of allegations of abuse or neglect. Some of the parents have lost custody of their children, and are working to regain that custody.

The GED program began with two evening sessions a week and grew to four nights a week. A Saturday class is being considered to meet the demand. There’s a waiting list of 30 to 40 people, Judge Alfonso said.

When Judge Alfonso requested help from MGCCC, Director of Adult Basic Education Becky Layton immediately agreed. Layton said, “It’s another opportunity for us to help the residents of our community. It’s helping them get a full-time job. It’s helping them pay bills, support their kids.” Educating parents also makes them better able to help their children with school work – something some of them were not able to do before. Conducting classes at the Youth Court also solves transportation problems and removes some of the intimidation which a college setting might pose, Layton said.

While some enrolled in the GED program struggled with basic skills, some excelled. One high school dropout enrolled in the program scored in the 99th percentile. He will enroll in college in January. Others also have gone on to college, Judge Alfonso said.

Earning a GED “brings them such self-esteem. It’s the self-esteem that comes with accomplishing something – a better education to better provide for their families,” Judge Alfonso said.

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